

Shuttles for Employee Commutes

Employer-sponsored shuttles can drastically decrease traffic congestion and carbon emissions by reducing solo driving during peak commute hours.



Bus in San Mateo County (Photo Courtesy of Commute.org)

The Impact

Employer-sponsored shuttles can drastically decrease traffic congestion and carbon emissions by reducing solo driving during peak commute hours. First/last-mile shuttles support public transit and change employee commute habits by providing transportation options that better connect commuters to public transit stops from their residence or place of work. Employers can have a variety of motivations to provide a shuttle service to their employees, from reducing their indirect greenhouse gas emissions from commuting, to attracting and retaining valuable employees, especially younger workers who don't own cars. Shuttles also help employers by reducing the need for costly parking infrastructure.

Employees benefit from employer-sponsored shuttles because they save money on gas and car maintenance and can use their commute time to work, read, socialize or sleep. Moreover, commuting on shuttles and public transit has been shown to lower employee stress compared to driving in congested traffic, and it can lead to workplace productivity.

Many shuttles are now electric and help remove carbon emissions.

Description

Employer-sponsored shuttle services come in two major forms: long-haul service (typically in private coaches) and first- and last-mile shuttles. Long-haul coaches are typically point-to-point services

that transport employees from pickup locations throughout a region to work sites, eliminating the need for employees to drive. Since long-haul service is costly, only a small percentage of employers may find it financially feasible to offer it.

First- and last-mile shuttles offer short-distance trips that provide that final connection from public transit stations (such as a bus, ferry, or train station) to the workplace and back for commuters. By providing this key connectivity, shuttles make commuting on public transit a viable alternative to driving alone. Some large employers find it financially feasible to deploy their own private shuttles for first- and last-mile services, but others find more value in participating in a shared shuttle service.

Joint funding by a consortium of employers and/or residential and commercial property managers is a benefit for shared shuttle services, as it enhances operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness. One way this collaboration can be managed is by forming a transportation management association (TMA), a nonprofit that collects dues and facilitates all components of a shuttle system on behalf of its members.

Employers in San Mateo County can use Commute.org to coordinate a shared shuttle system with other interested parties. Commute.org manages route planning, shuttle and driver procurement, public grant sponsorship, and customer service for groups of neighboring employers and property managers in the county. It also uses grants from the San Mateo County Transportation Authority to cover up to 75% of the operational costs, making this arrangement a less costly alternative than business or property managers independently arranging their own private shuttle services. Commute.org actively works with employers, businesses, multifamily residential properties, and commercial property managers to develop new routes and/or expand participation in existing routes.

Where It's Been Implemented

There are numerous private, public and private/public shuttle programs throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Facebook, Google, Apple, Genentech, Yahoo and many other large employers in the region offer long-distance shuttle services for their employees. Many of these employers also provide private first- and last-mile shuttle service to and from transit stations near their campuses. Genentech has a fleet of 60 coach buses, including some electric buses, which serves 45 stops throughout the Bay Area. The company also offers a transit connector service that shuttles people from BART and Caltrain stations to their offices and back. These transportation options have been crucial in getting 40% of Genentech's workforce to use alternative commute modes.

The Harbor Bay Business Park Association, located in Alameda, Calif., provides a shuttle bus connection to East Bay BART stations through a contract with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). The Stanford Research Park, a large industrial park in Palo Alto, has a robust shuttle system that helped reduce the share of employees who drive alone from 73% in 2016 to 63% in 2019. Commute.org manages more than 20 routes in San Mateo County, including one in Brisbane, with 25 contributing employers.

Key Drivers

According to the EPA, the average passenger vehicle emits 4.6 metric tons of CO2 every year. In the Bay Area, transportation accounts for 40% of total emissions, of which 70% are from passenger vehicles. As housing becomes more expensive, employees are being pushed farther out from their workplaces and forced to make longer and longer commutes to work. Studies have shown that those who commute longer distances are twice as likely to experience pain, dizziness, exhaustion and sleep deprivation. The same studies show that long-distance commuters, especially those who drive alone,

experience considerably more stress, which can lead to reduced workplace productivity and an increase in absenteeism and sick days.

Many employers recognize that employees are looking for alternative commute options and that supporting this shift has numerous benefits for the business. Currently, inadequate first- and last-mile transportation options make public transit expensive and unappealing.

Key Obstacles

Shuttle programs often require significant upfront costs. To address this issue, employers should focus on shared shuttle systems. Employers in San Mateo County can also benefit from grants by the San Mateo County Transportation Authority.

Another key obstacle is the common fear employees have of being “stranded,” i.e., unable to return home in the case of an emergency and/or changed plans. One way to address this problem is by offering a flexible ride home. Commute.org’s Guaranteed Ride Home program is available to anyone who works or attends college in San Mateo County. The program reimburses employees and students up to \$60 per trip when they experience a qualifying emergency (such as sickness or family emergency), provided they sign up in advance for an online account. Employers in San Mateo County can work with Commute.org to make sure that their employees are aware of the program.

In situations where long-haul coach shuttles or public transit — even with first and/or last-mile shuttles — is not a feasible option for employees, employers might sponsor vanpools to offer an alternative mode of shared, sustainable transportation. Vanpools work best for employees who live in locations where public transit is not a viable option to get to their worksite. Employers can contribute to their employees’ vanpools or simply provide for participants to use pre-tax dollars to pay for their vanpools. Additionally, vanpool participants can offset their costs with rebates from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the regional agency for the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area, and local agencies.

Key Factors for Success

Beyond cooperation with neighboring employers, cooperation with city and transit agencies can make shuttle programs more effective. These agencies can help businesses by giving permission to use existing bus stops, giving access to safe stops and shelters, providing layover and storage for shuttles, and providing access to transportation technology to make trips more efficient.

Resources

- John Ford, Executive Director, Commute.org, john@commute.org
- Wendy Silvani, Bay Area expert on shuttle services and other transportation demand management programs, w@silvanitransportationconsulting.com, 510-465-0724
- [Commute.org’s shuttle services](#)
- Southern Alameda Spare the Air Resource Team. [2014 Webinar on Shuttles](#)
- Wendy Silvani. [“Shuttle Diversity, Flexibility Are Keys to Success”](#)
- Palo Alto Online. [Stanford Research Park Gains Traction in Effort to Shift Workers' Commute Habits](#)

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